DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 376 498 CS 214 624

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TITLE Media, Metaphor and English Language Teaching.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Language Education (6th, Hong Kong, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Problems; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Learning Activities; *Mass Media Use; Media Research; Native Speakers; Preservice Teacher Education; *Second Language Learning; *Student Development; Student Surveys; Use Studies
IDENTIFIERS Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

A series of studies examined the media use habits of Hong Kong students trying to improve their English. Subjects for the first three studies, 138 pre-service student teachers in Hong Kong, completed questionnaires. Frequency of media use provided some indications of students' level of commitment to the study of English. In study four, students were asked to list the kinds of language items they learned from each type of media. A checklist developed from their responses became the data collection instrument for study five, which asked students to give examples of items they recently learned. None of the students felt they could provide any examples of items learned from the media. In study six, students were given one week to complete the checklist. Students indicated that they learned a wide range of vocabulary from media, but results of study seven indicated that students supplied correct meanings for 29% of the examples of items they said they learned from the media. Study eight analyzed a random sample of 50 essays from a total of 2000 on the topic of "Using the media to improve your English," written by first-year students at a tertiary institution. Study nine examined the main reason offered by subjects as to why they did not make much use of the media--the difficulty of understanding native English speakers. Findings suggest that the resources provided by the Hong Kong media in English are being seriously underutilized and could be exploited far more profitably in terms of student learning. (Contains 2 tables of data and 10 references.) (RS)

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ED 376 498

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MEDIA, METAPHOR AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

ABSTRACT

Teachers, lecturers and examiners continually exhort learners to 'use language by reading, writing, speaking and listening more.' This study examines the media use habits of a group of tertiary students in Hong Kong and challenges the assumption that exposure to the media will, of itself, increase either the amount that is learned or improve the quality of language learning.

CS214458

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MEDIA, METAPHOR AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

A HONG KONG EXAMPLE

Introduction

Although teachers and examiners constantly offer students advice about using the media to improve their English, students in Hong Kong, as in other places, do not seem to use the media in English to help them with their study of the language, as often as might be expected or desired.

I. What do teachers and examiners tell students about using the media?

The writers of the 1987 Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination Report comment that candidates should be encouraged to read newspapers and magazines printed in English (HKEA, 1988, p.98).

The advantages of using the media to develop spoken English are further emphasised as follows: subjects are strongly advised to make use of the media available to widen their horizons and to improve their oral skills (HKEA, 1988, p.97).

As a result of listening to the radio and watching Television in English it is assumed that learners will develop more accurate pronunciation, since

hearing words pronounced correctly will encourage learners to model their own speech and intonation patterns on what they hear. The point is further emphasised again by the Hong Kong examiners who state rather feelingly that what Hong Kong students desperately lack is exposure to the English of the real world outside the language classroom. This exposure can most easily be gained according to the writers of the report 'by regular listening to suitable radio and television programmes.'

The present investigation was undertaken to find out if a discrepancy does, in fact, exist between what teachers advocate and what students do and if there is a discrepancy what the reasons for it might be.

II. What do students report about using the media?

STUDIES 1, 2 & 3.

The first three studies were designed to obtain some answers to this question.

Subjects and data

Three groups of pre-service student teachers (138 students in all) were asked to indicate which category, daily, weekly or monthly, their media using habits most closely approached for: (a) listening to the radio in English; (b) reading a newspaper in English; (c) watching television programmes in English.

Study 1 only, included the following sentence completion item (d) my reasons for not using the English media are . . . , the results of which are reported in

Study 9.

Data analysis

Responses to each questionnaire item were tallied and categorised according to the frequency with which they occurred. The analysis of this data will now be discussed.

Results

Table 1 shows the total number of times students tallied each of the three types of media to indicate the frequency with which they use them.

Table 1 Media use frequencies recorded by students

	Daily +/-			Weekly +/-			Monthly +/-		
	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3
	N=46	N=48	N=44	N=46	N=48	N=44	N=46	N=48	N=44
Radio	01	04	02	00	11	03	23	30	39
Newsp.	04	03	00	17	31	14	00	14	30
TV.	08	10	06	27	30	22	00	08	16

RADIO

The first point to note is the small number of students overall who make use of the radio as a source of authentic learning.

Only 5/94 of the prospective teachers of English say that they listen to the radio in English almost everyday while only 2/44 of the NE group record in this category. Even so, much of this time is used for listening to music or pop songs which often contain idiosyncratic vocabulary and grammar. The

largest number of responses as Table 1 shows are listed by people who say they listen to the radio in English only about once a month or less.

What is disturbing about these figures is that they suggest that the rich sources of authentic material available for independent study which are provided by English radio programmes are being ignored.

NEWSPAPERS

Although, as Table 1 shows, the EE students spend more time on reading newspapers in English than do students who are studying other subjects. The figures, however, are again disappointing since newspapers provide an inexpensive, easily attainable source of authentic material which cover wide-ranging topics. The fact that local and international news can be monitored in Chinese to check how well the English version has been understood does not, as one might hope, seem to act as a stimulus.

TELEVISION

Table 1 shows that of the three media types considered here television is the most popular with the students in this study. The figures recorded still seem fairly low with a total of only 18/94 EE students in the first two studies stating that they watch TV in English almost everyday. Even the highest frequencies recorded which are for weekly television viewing indicate that only a little over half the students watch television in English even as often as once

a week.

Although the frequency of media use may provide some indications of students' level of commitment to the study of English figures alone do not tell us how effectively the time in interaction with the media is spent. This point leads to Study 4 which addressed the following question:

III. What do students say they learn from using the media?

STUDY 4.

In Study 4 Students were asked to complete the following sentences by listing the kinds of language (or other) items that they learn from each medium:

(a) I listen to English radio to learn . . . .

(b) I read English newspapers to learn . . . .

(c) I watch English television to learn . . . .

Since the contention in this paper is that most students do not structure their media involvement very carefully but listen, read or view somewhat randomly it was not surprising that some responses were very general. These responses were categorised under the headings, vocabulary, grammar, speaking and ideas/information. From these a checklist, which became the data collection instrument for Study 5, was compiled

IV. What examples do students give of items learnt from the media?

STUDY 5

To find out if these learners do, in fact, consciously try to learn from the media, Study 5 was carried out. In this investigation students were asked to give examples of items which they had recently learnt, or were in the process of learning, from the media. The rationale for this study was that when a new language item is being learnt it is present in the mind. Opportunities to try it out, or to check its use or meaning in different contexts, are constantly sought, therefore, examples of learning should not be difficult to supply. In practice, however, it was not expected that students would find this an easy task.

The outcome of the study was not surprising but even less positive than anticipated since none of the students felt they could provide any examples of items learnt from the media at all and asked to be allowed to keep the checklist for a week to fill it in.

Study 6 was therefore, set up and the students were given one week to complete the checklist. Although the same data collection instrument was used in Studies 5 and 6 the focus of each study was now obviously quite different.

Study 5, which received a nil response, was intended to discover how consciously the students were involved with independent learning from the

media. In Study 6 the students received advance knowledge that they were going to record what they were learning from the media in the coming week. While Study 5 attempted to tap students' normal level of awareness regarding their learning from the media, Study 6 advance organised them to think about what they might learn and to record items they noted.

STUDY 6

The students who participated in Study 6 were the same groups of EE who took part in Study 5. At the end of a week in which they had the checklist to guide their listening, reading and viewing they produced the responses listed in appendix I. The range and difficulty level of the vocabulary, which includes viability, haphazard, notoriously, ooze, agony, vigilant and lapse is interesting. The possibility cannot be ruled out, however, that the words were listed solely in response to the checklist, were not in fact, words which had been learned independently from the media and that no further active use had been made of them.

Students were asked to carry out one additional activity in order, at least in some measure, to test the quality of learning along with this assumption. Since it was not evident if students could now accurately use the words they had supplied in Study 6 these were listed and students were asked to give meanings for them in their own words and without the use of a dictionary.

However, the possibility that the definitions provided were based on students' prior knowledge of the words rather than on their recent learning from the media cannot be dismissed.

V. Retention of Learning - Word Meanings

STUDY 7.

Table 00 Number of correct meanings given for contributed examples of media learning (after elapse of 1 week)

Student	Examples contributed	Correct meanings supplied
1	2	1
2	4	2
3	1	0
4	1	0
5	2	0
6	3	0
7	6	3
8	5	2
9	3	0
10	3	2
11	5	0
12	1	0
13	3	1
14	1	1
15	0	0
16	5	1
17	3	1
	48	14

= 29% correct

Key points to note are that even after the students have (a) specified the kinds of language items they believe they learn from the media (Study 4),

(b) been provided with a list complied from these items as an aid to memory (Study 6), (c) been given an additional week to interact with the media and (d) been given a copy of the checklist to use as they listened to the radio, read newspapers or watched television, only 14 out of the 48 responses (i.e. word meanings) received (that is 29%) were accurate. This suggests that either the examples given were not, in fact, learnt but only listed to fulfil the requirements of the exercise, or that the quality of students' learning from the media is rather poor. Moreover, since the students in study 5 were unable to supply any examples of items they were currently learning from the media it has already been established that no ongoing attempts to learn formally and systematically from the media were apparently in progress.

If the language items are not noted, remembered, checked for accuracy and frequently practised in a number of situations then they are unlikely to become part of the student's established language bank and cannot be said to have been learned.

It has already been noted that some of the words listed may have been learnt previously and are not, therefore, attributable to learning from the media. However, if this is the case, the students could just as easily have volunteered these words the previous week in Study 5. At that time they claimed they were unable to provide examples of items recently learnt from the media and asked

to be given an additional week to complete the checklist.

If prior knowledge, rather than direct interaction with the media, did account for the learning of some of the listed words then the argument that the media in English is a largely untapped and poorly exploited source for independent learning is proportionately strengthened.

VI. What do students say they do to learn from the media

STUDY 8

In order to find out HOW students go about learning from the media a random sample of 50 essays from a total of 2000 on the topic 'Using the media to improve your English', written by first year students at a tertiary institution, were analysed. Comments on learning from radio, newspapers and television in each of the 50 essays were noted. These responses are discussed below.

Radio

Negative responses

Several students say the radio is too difficult to learn from because: the speech is too fast, there is nothing to watch, there are no Chinese subtitles or translations to help them check their guesses, most programmes are music programmes, songs are too difficult, topic changes are confusing, vocabulary is difficult or unsuitable (i.e. its too 'public-related'), and the difficulties make

them 'afraid of learning'.

This last comment emphasises how discouraged learners may feel if they are pressed to work with the media without proper guidelines for doing so.

Positive responses

Although it is the least popular medium overall

there are some students who find the radio helpful for the following reasons: its flexible - you can listen anywhere, its always available.- at home or on a bus, walkman radios are useful, young men enjoy pop songs, British Council programmes (are useful) because of their clear, slow speech.' An additional aid to learning favoured by some is 'dropping' (sic) notes while listening.

Newspapers

Negative responses

Although some students say that newspapers in English are too dull or stereotyped to read and others find the vocabulary too difficult or unsuitable for their everyday use, still others seem to find newspapers a useful medium for building vocabulary.

Positive responses

Among the positive suggestions for using newspapers is the idea of reading aloud to oneself because 'silent reading is not helpful', the idea of forming a

class group, of keeping old newspapers to solve language problems and of guessing strange words then checking the guesses in the dictionary are also suggested.

Television

Negative responses

Several students declared that TV is too difficult to learn from because the speech is too fast and not clear. Some students noted that the 'style' of speech and the 'way of speaking' is too difficult. Some find the Chinese subtitles so distracting that very little can be learnt while for others the entertainment content was found to have negative side effects.

This last item is interesting and calls for a short digression. In a study reported in 1989 Gradman and Hanania note that extra-curricular viewing of television and films had a negative effect on students scores on TOEFL tests, while reading for pleasure or information apparently had beneficial effects. These findings seem to support MacWilliam's (1986) comments which suggest that factors such as increased visual movement and competing aural/visual channels may have detrimental effects on students' learning. If these points are valid then tv and video may introduce factors which are inhibitory to learning.

Positive responses

Many unexamined and apparently untested comments derived from teachers

were invoked by the request to give positive suggestions for learning from English television. However some responses offer more specific suggestions. These include: Watch for 15 minutes/1 hour per day, watch the picture to help you to understand, watch the speakers face, train your listening - concentrate on listening, watch the Chinese news first to get the main ideas then watch the English news,'Use a combined method - 3 factors interactively, TV news, radio news and read the same items in the newspaper. In this way phrases and structures repeating the same idea may be learnt.'

Although some students are negative about the subtitles and find them distracting, others say they train themselves not to read them while a third group find them useful for checking how much they have understood.

Discussion

Whether or not the positive procedures described are actually used by the students who suggest them is another matter. The poor quality of grammar and vocabulary used in the essays (Study 8) indicates that the writers were not frequent consumers of authentic English materials. It is useful, however, to be aware that these, or any other, systematic methods for learning from the media may seldom be used. One must, therefore, conclude that the resources provided by the Hong Kong media in English are thus being seriously under utilized and could be exploited far more profitably in terms of student learning

than is presently the case .

(5) What reasons do students give for NOT using the media in English more frequently?

STUDY 9

It is clear from the above findings that the students in this study, even those who expect either to teach English or to teach in English, do not make much use of the resources provided by the media in Hong Kong to improve their English. Some of the reasons for this neglect were identified in the first study which included an additional question asking students to explain their reluctance to use the media in English. The following reasons were listed: (1) the speed and intonation patterns of native speaker speech, (2) the kind of language nsps use in the media, (3) the timing of programmes, (4) the prior claims of families, (5) the use of Chinese subtitles, (6) the easier accessibility of all necessary information in Chinese and (7) the choice of programmes. Only the second responses will be now be discussed in more detail.

Radio and Television

By far the most daunting problem for Hong Kong students who want to make use of the media in English is, in their view, the difficulty of understanding native speaker speech on radio and television. This was listed on 48 separate occasions by the students in Study 1 alone. They note that the speed of the speech along with its intonation patterns and pronunciation make it very

difficult for them to follow what is being said. A perhaps more important, because more frequently ignored, reason is what students call the 'strange' language used by native speakers in all types of media. It is suggested here that much of what students are responding to when they call this language 'strange' is the nonliteral components of the language. Even if students have learnt the literal and denotative meanings of vocabulary items, they are unable, without help, to transfer much of this knowledge to the often abstract, nonliteral and connotative uses of vocabulary and concepts in everyday currency. Radio and television programmes, since they reflect everyday speech, are very heavily loaded with nonliteral language. A count was noted of over 70 idioms used in a three hour period of viewing American sitcoms and action adventure programmes Irujo (1986b). If one adds to these the extensive range of nonliteral items which are now integrated into the normal grammatical structures of nsp English the comprehension demands made on learners becomes considerable.

Since they cannot follow what people are saying on radio or on television learners become very reluctant to use these forms of media.

The Hong Kong Exams Authority, which so strongly urges learners to use the media to improve their English recognised this stylistic problem. While promoting certain local radio and television programmes designed to provide

opportunities to build up 'disciplined listening over a period of months' (HKEA, 1987, p.6). it also notes that many programmes on radio and TV (like the news) have their own specialized vocabulary which must be acquired before you can get much out of the activity. If you persevere your English will benefit enormously (HKEA, 1987, p.7).

The writers of the booklet clearly acknowledge the difficulty of the task they are exhorting learners to carry out. They even identify 'specialised vocabulary used in radio and TV programmes' as a source of difficulty. What is not recognised, however, is that the type of specialised vocabulary is not confined to the media but is commonly found in most situations where English is used. Moreover, no mention is made of how this specialised vocabulary might be learnt. It seems that the enormity of the task being foisted upon the learner, with very little guidance, is underestimated by teachers and examiners.

HKEA tell candidates that using the media will help them to: (1) improve their oral skills (HKCE, 1987, p.97); (2) improve their listening skills (HKCE, 1987, p.82); (3) benefit all aspects of their language skills (HKCE, 1987, p.8I); (4) build vocabulary (HKHL, 1987. p.83); (5) broaden their knowledge of the world (HKHL, 1987, p.83).

These assertions, however, may be unwarranted since exposure alone does not guarantee that learning, either of or about the language, is taking

place. Learners must be in a position to benefit from their interaction with the media and press by knowing how to use and internalise what they are exposed to. Long (1982) also makes the point that input without interaction is not sufficient for language acquisition. If there is no opportunity for the negotiation of meaning learners receive no feedback are unable to clarify use (Irujo, 1986).

Two major points must be made in response to the results of this study. The first is that it must not be assumed that learners will structure their learning without ever being told how to do so. In order to give substance to all the claims made about the media as an effective aid to learning students need to be given guidelines such as the following to help them to use it more methodically: (1) Identify an area for attention; (2) Focus on what to learn and have clearly defined reasons for listening, viewing or reading; (3) Keep a record of what is being learnt; (4) Make an audio tape of the radio/tv programme (to enable replay and checking); (5) Check each item for accuracy and appropriate use. (Use a dictionary or check with a teacher); (6) Practise the new learning (i.e. set up practice situations); (7) Continue to use the new items; (i.e.find appropriate ways of applying the new learning); (8) Revise learnt items regularly.

Clearly, these points are self-evident to the teachers and examiners who

repeatedly urge learners to avail themselves of the media. Learners of English in Hong Kong, however, are possibly unaware that if the learning has not been planned the length of time spent watching television or skimming through Time magazine is no indicator that any learning at all has occurred. Teachers may assume that learners use the media in actively directed ways but this assumption may be unwarranted. Short periods of interaction with the media when clear objectives have been set are preferable to longer periods of uninvolved exposure.

The second major point arising from this study is that teachers and examiners should: recognise the centrality of nonliteral and metaphoric elements in the English language, consult the growing body of literature which is now available on the topic and be prepared to incorporate the teaching of these concepts as integral aspects of their programmes.

If the claims made for the effectivenss of learning from the media are to be substantiated, then both teachers and learners need to adopt a more systematic and realistic approach to independent media study.

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APPENDIX *1*.

Here are a list of words which students in your year group say they have recently learnt from listening to the radio, reading the newspapers or watching television.

Beside each word or phrase write down what you think the meaning is. Do not use a dictionary.

If you are not sure of the meaning do your best to guess.

The * starred items are incorrect. For these items write down what you think is the correct form that the student intended to write.

Please note this is not a test. It is just a learning review exercise.

brutal
strudel
cotton on to
pull round
teasing
milk-and-water
confession
eruption
blue
late-daughter
happy-sad
lapse
appalling

viability
ooze
outcry

vigilant
outweigh
speculation
a pinch of salt
screened out
roam
on time
notoriously
haphazard
brisk
to count on
behind closed doors
scrutinise

piroutte* (book)
shut one's eyes with*
agony

bozos
bulky-knit look
viability
shut out
finale
schedule
I'll wager you
mugging up
village 70 miles away
as source said we have to*
on not occasion should*
can assure you we won't
under no circumstances should
see eye to eye

a minister TO the king
opening* the light
marine mammel theatnes *